



CEO Report

Agenda Item 9

National Park Authority Board Meeting

8 December 2025

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1. Purpose

1.1. To provide updates on significant developments affecting the strategic context in which the National Park Authority operates as well as progress on the strategic areas of work not already reported elsewhere on the Board agenda.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. Board Members are asked to note the contents of this report for information.

3. Scottish Government Update

3.1. Members may be aware that the draft Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill is currently at Stage 2 of its journey through the Scottish Parliament. Over 300 amendments to the bill have been proposed by MSPs and will now be considered and debated by the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee before moving onto the next stage.

3.2. A varied series of proposed amendments relevant to National Parks and National Park Authorities have been made, including proposals on designation, duties, aims, boundaries and functions. We are closely following the progress and implications of any proposed amendments,

and we will update Members further as the bill progresses through parliament.

- 3.3. In September Officers responded with our feedback and comments to two Scottish Government consultations considered relevant to delivering our National Park Partnership Plan outcomes.
- 3.4. The **draft Environment Strategy** is an overarching approach to cover many elements of Scottish Government environmental policy. It includes actions aimed at supporting green jobs and industries, tackling poverty and promoting social justice, including transitioning to a circular economy, increasing renewable energy generation and implementing industrial decarbonisation, and supporting nature restoration projects.
- 3.5. The **draft (fourth) Land Use Strategy** outlines a vision for sustainable land use that aims to balance food production, nature recovery, climate action, and community needs. It seeks to guide the development and use of land through policies and actions that support integrated land use and address the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change.

4. Visitor Levy Update

- 4.1. Members will recall that the National Park Authority is continuing to closely engage with our four Local Authority partners as progress is made in considering the discretionary powers set out in the Act to introduce a visitor levy. Local Authorities are required to undertake a period of consultation on any proposed visitor levy scheme prior to implementation; below provides an update on progress within each area.

The Act mandates specific consultation requirements for the National Park Authority:

- Scheme Consultation (Section 13(b)): A Local Authority must consult the National Park Authority on any proposed Visitor Levy scheme.
- Net Proceeds Consultation (Section 19(2)): The National Park Authority must be consulted regarding the disbursement of the scheme's net proceeds, ensuring the scheme has regard to the National Park Partnership Plan as adopted under section 12(7)(a) of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000.

- 4.2. Officers have submitted responses to all four Local Authorities operating within the National Park boundaries. Following the conclusion and evaluation of statutory consultations, the National Park Authority will actively engage in strategic forums to contribute to the decision-making process for implementation and revenue disbursement by each Authority

where the decision to implement has been made. Additionally, the National Park Authority continues to engage with Local Authorities where a decision is either pending or on hold.

For awareness the National Park Destination Group businesses actively participated in visitor levy engagement, with the National Park Authority facilitating two dedicated sessions for Stirling Council and West Dunbartonshire Council stakeholders.

Argyll & Bute Council

4.3. The current status is **that implementation has been paused** - Full Council met on the 24th September and decided to delay. The leader of the Council will seek clarity from Scottish Government on potential legislative changes regarding a flat rate or tiered rate vs. the current percentage model.

4.3.1. The Council also agreed to lobby the UK Government on concerns from businesses about exceeding the VAT threshold and asked officers to explore the possibility of local exemptions. An update report will be brought back to a meeting of the full Council no later than January 2026 to advise of progress.

Stirling Council

4.4. The current status is that implementation will be decided by elected members on 11th December. The statutory engagement consultation period has now closed and the results of this engagement are currently being analysed with a full report being published on decision.

4.4.1. If the decision is made to implement, this will apply from 1 June 2027 for accommodation booked and paid for (in part or in full) from 1 January 2027. The rate proposed is 5% and will apply at the same level, all year round across the entire Stirling Council boundary area.

4.4.2. Informed by periods of early engagement, proposals have also been made to exempt residents who are registered for council tax (or within a council-tax registered property) in the Stirling Council, for carers in receipt of Carers' Allowance and for stays over 7 nights (the first 7 nights will be payable) in addition to statutory exemptions.

Perth & Kinross Council

4.5. The current status is that **the implementation decision has been paused**. It was anticipated to submit a draft Visitor Levy Scheme to the elected members for consideration in December 2025. However, due to the consideration of legislation changes by the Scottish Government, it is now proposed to submit a report in late Spring/Summer 2026.

4.5.1. This delay accounts for the Scottish Government's scheduled lodging of additional regulations in 2026, which may extend powers to Local Authorities, including the option for a single flat rate or tiered flat rate model. No final decision on whether to introduce a visitor levy in Perth and Kinross will be made until after this further work and additional consultation.

West Dunbartonshire Council

4.6. The current status is that **the implementation decision has been approved**. This was agreed by elected members at the Council meeting of 12 November.

4.6.1. The Visitor Levy will apply to overnight stays from 1 July 2027 and will apply for pre-bookings made (and paid for in part or in full) on or after 1 October 2026. The levy rate will be 5% and will apply year-round. The levy will be the same rate across the entire West Dunbartonshire local authority area.

4.6.2. An agreement to establish the West Dunbartonshire Visitor Levy Forum was made. The National Park Authority will formalise its strategic involvement by becoming a member of this new forum. This membership ensures the Park Authority's ability to provide positive input into the development of the new overarching tourism strategy.

5. West Highland Way Trust

5.1. Members will be aware of the ongoing work to establish the West Highland Way as a charitable trust and as such the West Highland Way Trust was established in July 2025 which is a significant milestone for the West Highland Way Management Group.

5.2. Two specialist consultants have been appointed to aid the full set up, and for fundraising for the Trust. This will facilitate the Trust's operating capacity and enable the Trust to take on all assets. A transfer of interim monies between the National Park Authority (on behalf of the West Highland Way Management Group) and the West Highland Way Trust to facilitate this has been agreed.

- 5.3. A Service Level Agreement detailing interim support from the National Park Authority has been approved by the West Highland Way Trust.
- 5.4. A Project Board is being established to ensure seamless cooperation, effective oversight, and to manage a smooth final transition of responsibilities and assets. This board will comprise of representatives from the West Highland Way Trustees, the National Park Authority, and the West Highland Way Management Group. It is anticipated that the transfer of all assets will take place no later than end of this financial year.

6. Visitor Season 2025 Review

- 6.1. The section below summaries some headlines from the visitor season this year, specifically in relation to tourism and visitor management in the National Park.

This year we are changing the format of previous End of Season Reports and creating a new reporting style which is more concise and better reflects the data and insights we have and continue to gather from across the season. This report will be shared across partners, and also with Members in the new year.

- 6.2. As Members may know, the local tourism sector continues to report significant operational challenges including staff recruitment and retention, underpinned by a lack of affordable housing within the area.
- 6.3. The current economic climate, characterised by sustained increases in operating costs, has required businesses to conduct comprehensive reviews of their pricing structures. To mitigate these pressures, some businesses reported implementing cost-mitigation strategies, including reducing staffing levels, reducing off season operating hours and halting planned investment and capital expenditure during the review period. Businesses have been reporting higher levels of turnover but low profit margins due to increased costs. Staffing costs have increased due to National Insurance contribution and the raising of the minimum wage.
- 6.4. Furthermore, the market trend of shorter lead-in times for travel bookings continues, which complicates accurate business forecasting across the sector. However, overall business performance was generally up from the previous year, no doubt aided by the fine weather during spring and summer.
- 6.5. Camping at private sites across the National Park has seen high demand with good levels of profitability. This highlights a recent trend towards demand for budget accommodation types while consumer spending continues to be affected by inflation and cost-of-living

pressures increase on disposable incomes. Overall, the tourism market continues to see strong overseas visits as well as welcoming visitors from south of the border and the coach market remains buoyant. However, businesses are also reporting welcoming fewer domestic visitors. Looking ahead, future bookings remain consistent with recent years.

- 6.6. For our teams out in the field it has been a season of changing conditions, a busy start with extended periods of warm, dry weather, Storm Floris in the middle of the season leading to campsites being closed and elevated levels of site and tree safety checks by both Estates and Ranger staff. This year our seasonal team comprised of 53 Seasonal Rangers, 2 Seasonal Environment Officers, and a Seasonal Administrative Assistant to complement our permanent Ranger and Estates staff.
- 6.7. On peak sunny days, litter, fires, and traffic management have been the biggest challenges at known visitor hot spots. Throughout the season our teams have continued to engage and work with partners to coordinate our collective efforts, and we were pleased to see Police Scotland colleagues and our National Park Visitor Management Groups continuing to work effectively. Stirling Council have also focused more resources on East Loch Lomond to address irresponsible parking and stakeholders involved around Duck Bay have also co-ordinated actions to address particular unwanted behaviours.
- 6.8. Another change within 2025 is that we successfully managed the day-to-day operation of Salloch Campsite on behalf of Forestry and Land Scotland as a pilot approach. We are delighted to process 2,600 bookings and welcomed over 4,000 adults, and 550 children to enjoy low-cost camping at the site. This season we also trialled basing some of our Rangers at our Milarrochy Bay site on weekends to help manage visitor pressures onsite.
- 6.9. A final significant change this season has been the first year of the new Loch Lomond Byelaws which we are delighted to report has gone well. Alongside the necessary enforcement activity, a strong emphasis was placed on safety and education to loch users. Rangers reported that the vast majority of visitors who were previously unaware of the new Byelaws responded positively to clear, practical guidance provided by staff both on land and on the water.
- 6.10. Over the course of the season, a total of 205 Loch Lomond Byelaw violations were recorded, compared to 154 in 2024 and 168 in 2023.

These included 18 contraventions within the new 6 kph zones and 63 contraventions within the 11 kph zones.

6.11. Members may also remember that a new online registration system was launched in February 2025 which is key to supporting good levels of compliance and positive behaviour change. During the season, the Boat Team stopped 55 loch users who had to date failed to complete the required Master Registration process and this indicates a high level of compliance with the new system. The Registration System now holds over 3,500 registered users, demonstrating strong uptake in its first year and justifying the investment made into this project to ensure the customer experience is as easy and intuitive as possible.

Executive Sponsor/Author: Gordon Watson, CEO